

John R. Hinnells EDITOR

Mithraic studies

Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies

Volume I

Manchester University Press
Rowman and Littlefield

not necessarily reflect the realities of the situation, and they may well have been deliberately ambiguous to convey different ideas to different people. Let each understand what he will. If the citizen does and is satisfied, the government has achieved its goal. Perhaps the extent to which there are convincing and divergent interpretations of the Kuṣāṇa coinage is an indication of its very success as numismatic propaganda. Nevertheless, by analysing the common copper coins of the Kuṣāṇas we can begin to detect regional differences in emphasis in different territories of the confederacy and to assess the role of Mithra–Helios among the other deities.

13 *The Dura Mithraeum*

Contents

Editor's preface. The Dura Mithraeum. 1. Mithra in Syria. 2. Mithraism at Dura. 3. The interior arrangement of the Mithraeum. 4. The bas-reliefs. 5. The paintings. 6. The graffiti and dipinti. 7. Conclusion. Appendix 13.1. Plutarch's Mithraic pirates, by E. D. Francis. Appendix 13.2. Mammalia in the hunting fresco, by G. Evelyn Hutchinson.

Editor's preface

In 1896, at the age of twenty-eight, Franz Cumont inaugurated the modern history of Mithraic scholarship by publishing his *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* II.¹ Three years later he provided a critical introduction to the evidence assembled in volume II. The second part of this introduction was then printed separately as *Les Mystères de Mithra*, a compelling portrait of the biography and nature of Mithra which seemed to illuminate the dark recesses enshrouding the Iranian origin and Roman cult of the god. In his quest for coherent synthesis, however, Cumont sometimes pressed his conclusions beyond the available evidence,² and what many *epigoni* have on occasion taken to represent an unassailable judgement may rest on little more than an imaginative interpretation of unusually problematic

¹ Brussels, 1896; vol. I, Brussels, 1899. The titles of other books by Cumont to which reference will be made are as follows: F. Cumont, *Les Mystères de Mithra*, Brussels, 1900 (= *TMMM* I, pp. 223 f.; third edition, in German, by K. Latte, Leipzig, 1923; references in the present article are to T. J. McCormack's English translation [London, 1903] of the second French edition, abbr. *Mysterics*); *id.*, *Fouilles de Doura-Europos* (1922-3), Paris, 1926 (abbr. *Fouilles*); *id.*, *Les Religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*,⁴ Paris, 1929 (abbr., *Religions orientales*⁴); *id.*, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des Romains*, Paris, 1942 (abbr. *Symbolisme funéraire*); *id.* (posth.), *Lux perpetua*, Paris, 1949 (abbr. *Lux perpetua*); also, J. Bidez and F. Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés; Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspes d'après la tradition grecque*, two volumes, Paris, 1938 (abbr. *Mages hellénisés*); M. I. Rostovtzeff *et al.*, *The excavations at Dura-Europos, Preliminary Report of the Seventh and Eighth Seasons of Work 1933-4 and 1934-5*, New Haven, 1939 (abbr. *Reports* VII-VIII); L. A. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, Leiden, 1968 (abbr., *MII*); E. D. Francis, 'Mithraic graffiti from Dura-Europos,' pp. 424 f. below (abbr. 'Graffiti').

² Cf., for example, the criticisms of S. Wikander, *EMM* (reviewed by D. Schlumberger, *Syria* xxx, 1953, pp. 325-30), and the contributions of R. Gordon and J. R. Hinnells to this volume (pp. 215 ff., pp. 290 ff., respectively); cf. also appendix 13.1 below.

since they introduce certain elements which add further dimension to our conception of this, the supreme event of Mithra's terrestrial mission. Both scenes are closely related, although they derive from regions widely distant from each other. Indeed, this fact itself offers confirmation of the fundamental unity of Mithraic doctrine. The first is a decoration on the bottom of a cup discovered in 1905 in the Roman cemetery of St Matthew near Trier.¹⁶¹ Mithra and the Sun are seated together on a divan in front of the food which they are about to eat, two small loaves of bread¹⁶² and, in a plate, perhaps a piece of meat.¹⁶³ Sol prepares to drain his *rhyton*, which he holds in his right hand, while Mithra accepts his own *rhyton* from one of his two acolytes, now transformed into a cup-bearer and standing at his right. The second acolyte, on the left of the Sun, holds a scarcely distinguishable object in his left hand, possibly a napkin, and with his right offers a loaf of bread similar to those on the table. A huge lion is lying in front of this table, in the centre of the composition.¹⁶⁴ Above we see a large *krater*, encircled with a snake which is plunging its head inside the vessel as if about to drink its contents. The raven perches on the right and, on the left, a cock is moving towards the vase.

If this assembly of gods and beasts appeared only on a small clay cup we might decide to attribute it to the potter's imagination, but a recent discovery in Portugal brings us clear proof that the scene expresses a well established tradition in the mysteries. In the ruins of a Mithraeum at Troia (the ancient Caetobriga, situated opposite Setubal) five fragments of a sculptured relief have come to light.¹⁶⁵ On the left of the original relief we see the remains of a representation of a bull-slaying god. A foreleg of the bull is still visible, Cautopates is lowering his torch, and, above, we see the portrait of Luna. At the right and in the same proportions the banquet scene is represented. We may therefore conclude that, as at Konjica, the two representations form a pair. Mithra is wearing his characteristic oriental costume, and Sol's *nimbus* is radiate. Both hold a *rhyton* in their left hands, and the sun god is moving to the right as if he intended to pick up an object (possibly a large drinking vessel?) which Cautes is carrying in both hands. Cautes' torch has fallen to the ground at his feet. Above the flame of this lighted torch we see a

¹⁶¹ *WDZ* xxv, pp. 464 f., plate 14; *RA*, 1946, pp. 189 f., fig. 3; Saxl, *MTU*, p. 20, plate 10, No. 61; *CIMRM* I, p. 328, No. 988; note also Löschcke's excellent commentary in *Trierer Heimatbuch. Festschrift zur rheinischen Jahrtausendfeier*, Trier, 1925, pp. 322-6.

¹⁶² For a comparable offering in the liturgy of the Parsis, see *TMMM* I, pp. 320 f.

¹⁶³ Cf. the role of the Raven discussed above (p. 178).

¹⁶⁴ These animals represent the four elements (Lion: Fire, Snake: Earth, Crab: Water, Bird: Air). The cave in which the mystical banquet took place was considered an image of the world whose vault is the sky. For this reason, the symbols of those elements from which the world is formed are represented there (cf. Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* 6: . . . εἰκόνα φέροντος [αὐτῶ] τοῦ σπηλαίου τοῦ κόσμου, ὃν ὁ Μίθρας ἐδημιούργησε, τῶν δὲ ἐντὸς κατὰ συμμετρους ἀποστάσεις σύμβολα φερόντων τῶν κοσμικῶν στοιχείων καὶ κλιμάτων; *RA* 1946, p. 191).

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Mendes da Costa, *Archeol. Port.* xxix, 1930-31, appeared 1934, pp. 5 f., fig. 26; *CIMRM* I, p. 277, No. 798. Cf. Cumont, *CRAI* 1934, p. 262; *RA* 1946, pp. 191 f., fig. 4.

krater encircled, as at Trier, by a snake. To the right, Cautopates holds his lowered torch in his left hand, and with his right he lifts an *oenochoe* close to the *krater* as though he were going to pour some wine.

We have previously argued¹⁶⁶ that the group of the lion, the *krater* and the snake, frequently attested on the bas-reliefs of the Danube and the Rhine, symbolised three distinct elements—fire, water and earth. The two representations which we have just discussed confirm this interpretation, for, in the one case at Troia, the burning torch has been intentionally set near the *krater* in place of the fiery lion and, in the other at Trier, we find, next to the customary group, two birds which are clearly emblematic of the air through which they fly.¹⁶⁷

In the Mithraic mysteries, however, such cosmological and astronomical explanations are always secondary. They belong to a system of recondite exegesis of the old tales and legends by which the artists who created these sculptures were inspired. It is not improbable that the sacred legend also reserved a role in the episode of the divine feast for the faithful companions of Mithra, the snake and the lion, who accompanied the *θεός ἔφιππος*, and for the cock, sacred to Cautes,¹⁶⁸ the *ἄρνις Περσικός* whose voice, in announcing the appearance of the light, routed the demons.¹⁶⁹ At Trier, as at Troia, we see that they also participated in the divine feast and probably drank of the wine which conferred immortality. We are, however, too ignorant of the Mithraic *ἔργος λόγος* to go into further details. Were the animals transformed into heroes with human form by virtue of this draught? It would be altogether hazardous to make such a suggestion in view of the poor state of our knowledge.¹⁷⁰ The essential meaning of the act to which Mithraism attached so high a religious value is, however, confirmed by the monuments which we have just considered: reunited at the final meal before their ascension into Heaven, the two gods consume the bread made from the grain produced by the body of the bull at its death and they drink the wine drawn from the vine which issued from its blood. Thus we at least catch a glimpse of the parallels to which Justin Martyr alluded when he accused the vicious forces of evil of having created the Mithraic communion to parody the institution of the Eucharist.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ *TMMM* I, pp. 100 f., 80.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Löschcke, *op. cit.* (cf. n. 161 above), p. 323.

¹⁶⁸ *TMMM* I, p. 210.

¹⁶⁹ Prudentius, *Cath.* 1.37; *ferunt uagantes daemones, / laetos tenebris noctium / gallo canente exterritos / sparsim timere et cedere* (cf. *TMMM* I, pp. 128, 210; *RARA* v, 1927, p. 71; *CRAI* 1942, pp. 288 f.; *Lux perpetua*, pp. 230, 409 f. [Cumont himself requested a reference to *Lux perpetua*, cf. preface, n. 14 above].

¹⁷⁰ Löschcke (*op. cit.*) has proposed a different interpretation.

¹⁷¹ Justin, *Apol.* 1.66 (cf. *TMMM* I, p. 230). On this parody of the Eucharist, see my article in *RA* 1946, pp. 183 f., especially 194, where I discuss a Syriac text in which certain Magi have apparently substituted the body of Zoroaster for the flesh of the bull in their sacrificial feast. The text in question is entitled *The Book of the Elements* (*στοιχεῖα*) of the World: note that precisely these elements are represented in the Mithraic versions of the banquet.

(b) *The signs of the zodiac.* The soffit of the vaulted niche was decorated with pictures of the twelve signs of the zodiac, each set in a rectangular frame (see plate 30). They were drawn in red-brown strokes and coloured with a neutral shade of brown, red or yellow. Like the mythological representations which we have just discussed, this series started at the top of the vault, above the portrait of Kronos. The first picture, that of Aries, has disappeared, like Taurus to its left. Lower down, the Gemini, often identified with Hercules and Apollo,¹⁷² are pictured as two young men standing side by side. The shoulders of Castor–Hercules are covered with the lion-skin hanging down his back. He supports himself by resting his right hand on his club. His left hand is at waist height and probably held the apples of the Hesperides. Apollo is represented as an ephebe dressed in a simple *chlamys*. His torso and legs are bare and he lacks any distinguishing attribute. Cancer is pictured as a large, reddish-brown crab, claws at the ready. Leo is painted yellow. He has a mane and is leaping to the right. Virgo is a woman, her head encircled by a *nimbus*, her body modestly veiled by long, pleated garments. Her lowered left hand may have held an ear of corn. The series continues on the right, progressing, like the legend of Mithra, from the bottom to the top. First we see Libra depicted as a rosy youth who stands naked, facing us as he holds aloft the scales. Next come Scorpio and Sagittarius. Scorpio's coiled tail curves up to the left, and Sagittarius is pictured as a centaur galloping to the right and drawing his bow. His equine hind quarters are somewhat damaged. Finally Capricorn has a goat's head and body, which, however, ends in the writhing tail of a sea monster. The plaster has come away from the upper curve of the vault and carried Aquarius and Pisces with it.

These figures are no different from many other familiar representations of the zodiac, but they acquire a certain iconographic importance from the fact that they can be precisely dated. We have already noted that these twelve celestial asterisms were reproduced on the larger of the two bas-reliefs in the Dura Mithraeum (p. 166). According to astrological belief, these constellations were, together with the planets, the mighty artisans of human and material destiny. Like the Chaldeans, the votaries of Mithra accordingly considered them to be divine and rendered them passionate worship in all their shrines.¹⁷³

(c) *The two Magi.* These two beautiful figures, painted on either side of the piers of the cult niche, are of considerable value, for until now nothing similar

¹⁷² [Cf. H. Seyrig, 'Héraclès–Nergal', *Syria* xxiv, 1944, pp. 76 f.; Susan B. Downey, *The Hercules Sculpture* (= *Dura-Europos Final Report* III, pt. 1, fasc. 1, New Haven 1969, p. 48 n. 5)].

¹⁷³ *TMMM* I, p. 110 (on the ritual significance of the signs of the Zodiac); G. Thiele, *Antike Himmelsbilder mit Forschungen zu Kunstgeschichte des Sternhimmels*, Berlin 1898, pp. 65 f.; A. Bouché-Leclercq, *Astrologie grecque*, Paris 1899, pp. 130 f.; Daremberg-Saglio, *Dict. antiq.* (s.v. 'Zodiacus', pp. 1061 f.); [K. Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte*, Munich 1960, p. 351.]

has been found in any other Mithraeum (see plate 25). They are both dressed in Persian costume¹⁷⁴ and majestically enthroned on chairs with raised backs. Owing to the carelessness of the painter, who ignored the rules of perspective, their four carved feet are all on the same level. The head of each figure is crowned with a tall, curved *tiara* and each body is clothed in a long tunic with a wide, embroidered belt around the waist. They both wear billowing breeches knotted at the ankle above their high boots. A yellow mantle has been thrown around their shoulders and hangs down their backs; it is fastened at the chest with a round brooch. The tunic and the breeches are decorated in front with vertical stripes, and between double borders a row of buttons has been sewn. The neck of the tunic is embroidered like the belt. The sleeves are circled with bands, like a *clavus*, one at the wrists, the other round the upper arms. The figures wear a short beard and a drooping moustache. Their black eyes are wide open under arched eyebrows and their whole face is distinctively Iranian in type. The artist has executed these features with particular skill. He has endeavoured to reproduce the lines of the cheeks and the throat with especially distinct colours and has enhanced this effect with fine hatching which causes the white plaster to show beneath the colour. He apparently aspired to paint actual portraits, but whom did he intend to depict? The oriental sages each clasp a white *volumen* in their left hand and, in their right, a black cane with a flat pommel and tapered to a point which one holds erect and the other on a slant. The presence of the rolls defines them as teachers, and the black cane can only represent a magical ebony staff,¹⁷⁵ the characteristic attribute of a thauma-

¹⁷⁴ Cf. M. Rostovtzeff (*JCS* v, 1935, pp. 279 f.): 'The two figures are Palmyrene in all their characteristic traits. Their dress, while exactly the same as that of many of the heroized dead on the Palmyrene funerary bas-reliefs, is quite different from the dress of the Achaemenid or Parthian Magi described above (viz. in "Dura and the problem of Parthian Art"), and hardly can be taken to be the dress of Palmyrene priests. It is the parade dress of the Palmyrene aristocracy. The style of the two figures is also Palmyrene and can be compared with the style of the painted portraits of the deceased in late Palmyrene graves, though there is not the slightest trace of Romanization or Hellenization in the Dura figures.' Note also in the Mithraeum at Capua, the priests (or at least some of them) wore oriental costumes (cf. Minto, *Notizie degli Scavi* xxi, 1924, pp. 361 f.; Vermaseren, *Mithriaca* I, pp. 16 f.; Cumont, *Religions orientales*⁴, plate 13. Compare the *pater* in the Mithraeum of Sta. Prisca (Vermaseren and van Essen, *EMSP*, p. 169). We might therefore be led to suppose that the Dura portraits represent those members of the community of *μάγοι* who had contributed to the construction of the shrine. Two *patres patrum* are specifically mentioned on one of the inscriptions (*Reports* VII-VIII, No. 855, *CIMRM* I, No. 57) but it is doubtful if anything definite can be inferred on the basis of such evidence (cf. *CRAI* 1945, p. 417, n. 3).

¹⁷⁵ Ps.-Callisth, I.1 *ἐβεννίνην ῥάβδον*; trans. Iul. Valer. I.1: *tenens in manu uirgam [eb]neam et per magicas artes, uocabat daemones*; K. Preisendanz, *Pap. Gr. Mag.*, 1.279 (= vol. I, p. 16): *καὶ στολίσας σεαυτὸν προφητικῶ σχήματι ἔχε ἐβεννίνην ῥάβδον ἐν τῇ λαῖᾳ χειρὶ κτλ.* (cf. I.336, p. 18); *id.*, 8.2 (= vol. 2, p. 46): *οὐδὰ σου καὶ τὸ ξύλον· τὸ ἐβεννίνου*; D. L. Proem. 7: *... καὶ κάλαμος ἡ βακτηρία, ᾧ κεντῶντες, φασί, τοῦ τυροῦ ἀνηροῦντο καὶ ἀπήσθιον*; Roscher, *Lexicon* (s.v. 'Zauberstab', p. 555).